**Transcript of “Telling Stories from Africa” | Chris Aboni**

00:00

I just heard the best joke about Bond Emeruwa. I was having lunch with him just a few minutes ago, and a Nigerian journalist comes -- and this will only make sense if you've ever watched a James Bond movie -- and a Nigerian journalist comes up to him and goes, "Aha, we meet again, Mr. Bond!" (Laughter) It was great.

00:19

So, I've got a little sheet of paper here, mostly because I'm Nigerian and if you leave me alone, I'll talk for like two hours.

00:27

I just want to say good afternoon, good evening. It's been an incredible few days. It's downhill from now on. I wanted to thank Emeka and Chris. But also, most importantly, all the invisible people behind TED that you just see flitting around the whole place that have made sort of this space for such a diverse and robust conversation. It's really amazing. I've been in the audience. I'm a writer, and I've been watching people with the slide shows and scientists and bankers, and I've been feeling a bit like a gangsta rapper at a bar mitzvah. (Laughter) Like, what have I got to say about all this? And I was watching Jane [Goodall] yesterday, and I thought it was really great, and I was watching those incredible slides of the chimpanzees, and I thought, "Wow. What if a chimpanzee could talk, you know? What would it say?" My first thought was, "Well, you know, there's George Bush." But then I thought, "Why be rude to chimpanzees?" I guess there goes my green card. (Laughter)

01:38

There's been a lot of talk about narrative in Africa. And what's become increasingly clear to me is that we're talking about news stories about Africa; we're not really talking about African narratives. And it's important to make a distinction, because if the news is anything to go by, 40 percent of Americans can't -- either can't afford health insurance or have the most inadequate health insurance, and have a president who, despite the protest of millions of his citizens -- even his own Congress -- continues to prosecute a senseless war. So if news is anything to go by, the U.S. is right there with Zimbabwe, right? Which it isn't really, is it? And talking about war, my girlfriend has this great t-shirt that says, "Bombing for peace is like fucking for virginity." It's amazing, isn't it?

02:31

The truth is, everything we know about America, everything Americans come to know about being American, isn't from the news. I live there. We don't go home at the end of the day and think, "Well, I really know who I am now because the Wall Street Journal says that the Stock Exchange closed at this many points." What we know about how to be who we are comes from stories. It comes from the novels, the movies, the fashion magazines. It comes from popular culture.

03:03

In other words, it's the agents of our imagination who really shape who we are. And this is important to remember, because in Africa the complicated questions we want to ask about what all of this means has been asked from the rock paintings of the San people, through the Sundiata epics of Mali, to modern contemporary literature. If you want to know about Africa, read our literature -- and not just "Things Fall Apart," because that would be like saying, "I've read 'Gone with the Wind' and so I know everything about America." That's very important. There's a poem by Jack Gilbert called "The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart." He says, "When the Sumerian tablets were first translated, they were thought to be business records. But what if they were poems and psalms? My love is like twelve Ethiopian goats standing still in the morning light. Shiploads of thuja are what my body wants to say to your body. Giraffes are this desire in the dark." This is important.

04:11

It's important because misreading is really the chance for complication and opportunity. The first Igbo Bible was translated from English in about the 1800s by Bishop Crowther, who was a Yoruba. And it's important to know Igbo is a tonal language, and so they'll say the word "igwe" and "igwe": same spelling, one means "sky" or "heaven," and one means "bicycle" or "iron." So "God is in heaven surrounded by His angels" was translated as -- [Igbo]. And for some reason, in Cameroon, when they tried to translate the Bible into Cameroonian patois, they chose the Igbo version. And I'm not going to give you the patois translation; I'm going to make it standard English. Basically, it ends up as "God is on a bicycle with his angels." This is good, because language complicates things.

05:08

You know, we often think that language mirrors the world in which we live, and I find that's not true. The language actually makes the world in which we live. Language is not -- I mean, things don't have any mutable value by themselves; we ascribe them a value. And language can't be understood in its abstraction. It can only be understood in the context of story, and everything, all of this is story. And it's important to remember that, because if we don't, then we become ahistorical. We've had a lot of -- a parade of amazing ideas here. But these are not new to Africa. Nigeria got its independence in 1960. The first time the possibility for independence was discussed was in 1922, following the Aba women's market riots. In 1967, in the middle of the Biafran-Nigerian Civil War, Dr. Njoku-Obi invented the Cholera vaccine. So, you know, the thing is to remember that because otherwise, 10 years from now, we'll be back here trying to tell this story again.

06:11

So, what it says to me then is that it's not really -- the problem isn't really the stories that are being told or which stories are being told, the problem really is the terms of humanity that we're willing to bring to complicate every story, and that's really what it's all about. Let me tell you a Nigerian joke. Well, it's just a joke, anyway. So there's Tom, Dick and Harry and they're working construction. And Tom opens up his lunch box and there's rice in it, and he goes on this rant about, "Twenty years, my wife has been packing rice for lunch. If she does it again tomorrow, I'm going to throw myself off this building and kill myself." And Dick and Harry repeat this. The next day, Tom opens his lunchbox, there's rice, so he throws himself off and kills himself, and Tom, Dick and Harry follow. And now the inquest -- you know, Tom's wife and Dick's wife are distraught. They wished they'd not packed rice. But Harry's wife is confused, because she said, "You know, Harry had been packing his own lunch for 20 years." (Laughter)

07:11

This seemingly innocent joke, when I heard it as a child in Nigeria, was told about Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, with the Hausa being Harry. So what seems like an eccentric if tragic joke about Harry becomes a way to spread ethnic hatred. My father was educated in Cork, in the University of Cork, in the '50s. In fact, every time I read in Ireland, people get me all mistaken and they say, "Oh, this is Chris O'Barney from Cork." But he was also in Oxford in the '50s, and yet growing up as a child in Nigeria, my father used to say to me, "You must never eat or drink in a Yoruba person's house because they will poison you." It makes sense now when I think about it, because if you'd known my father, you would've wanted to poison him too. (Laughter)

08:03

So I was born in 1966, at the beginning of the Biafran-Nigerian Civil War, and the war ended after three years. And I was growing up in school and the federal government didn't want us taught about the history of the war, because they thought it probably would make us generate a new generation of rebels. So I had a very inventive teacher, a Pakistani Muslim, who wanted to teach us about this. So what he did was to teach us Jewish Holocaust history, and so huddled around books with photographs of people in Auschwitz, I learned the melancholic history of my people through the melancholic history of another people. I mean, picture this -- really picture this. A Pakistani Muslim teaching Jewish Holocaust history to young Igbo children.

08:51

Story is powerful. Story is fluid and it belongs to nobody. And it should come as no surprise that my first novel at 16 was about Neo-Nazis taking over Nigeria to institute the Fourth Reich. It makes perfect sense. And they were to blow up strategic targets and take over the country, and they were foiled by a Nigerian James Bond called Coyote Williams, and a Jewish Nazi hunter. And it happened over four continents. And when the book came out, I was heralded as Africa's answer to Frederick Forsyth, which is a dubious honor at best. But also, the book was launched in time for me to be accused of constructing the blueprint for a foiled coup attempt. So at 18, I was bonded off to prison in Nigeria.

09:37

I grew up very privileged, and it's important to talk about privilege, because we don't talk about it here. A lot of us are very privileged. I grew up -- servants, cars, televisions, all that stuff. My story of Nigeria growing up was very different from the story I encountered in prison, and I had no language for it. I was completely terrified, completely broken, and kept trying to find a new language, a new way to make sense of all of this. Six months after that, with no explanation, they let me go. Now for those of you who have seen me at the buffet tables know that it was because it was costing them too much to feed me. (Laughter) But I mean, I grew up with this incredible privilege, and not just me -- millions of Nigerians grew up with books and libraries. In fact, we were talking last night about how all of the steamy novels of Harold Robbins had done more for sex education of horny teenage boys in Africa than any sex education programs ever had. All of those are gone.

10:45

We are squandering the most valuable resource we have on this continent: the valuable resource of the imagination. In the film, "Sometimes in April" by Raoul Peck, Idris Elba is poised in a scene with his machete raised, and he's being forced by a crowd to chop up his best friend -- fellow Rwandan Army officer, albeit a Tutsi -- played by Fraser James. And Fraser's on his knees, arms tied behind his back, and he's crying. He's sniveling. It's a pitiful sight. And as we watch it, we are ashamed. And we want to say to Idris, "Chop him up. Shut him up." And as Idris moves, Fraser screams, "Stop! Please stop!" Idris pauses, then he moves again, and Fraser says, "Please! Please stop!" And it's not the look of horror and terror on Fraser's face that stops Idris or us; it's the look in Fraser's eyes. It's one that says, "Don't do this. And I'm not saying this to save myself, although this would be nice. I'm doing it to save you, because if you do this, you will be lost." To be so afraid that you're standing in the face of a death you can't escape and that you're soiling yourself and crying, but to say in that moment, as Fraser says to Idris, "Tell my girlfriend I love her." In that moment, Fraser says, "I am lost already, but not you ... not you." This is a redemption we can all aspire to.

12:24

African narratives in the West, they proliferate. I really don't care anymore. I'm more interested in the stories we tell about ourselves -- how as a writer, I find that African writers have always been the curators of our humanity on this continent. The question is, how do I balance narratives that are wonderful with narratives of wounds and self-loathing? And this is the difficulty that I face. I am trying to move beyond political rhetoric to a place of ethical questioning. I am asking us to balance the idea of our complete vulnerability with the complete notion of transformation of what is possible.

13:07

As a young middle-class Nigerian activist, I launched myself along with a whole generation of us into the campaign to stop the government. And I asked millions of people, without questioning my right to do so, to go up against the government. And I watched them being locked up in prison and tear gassed. I justified it, and I said, "This is the cost of revolution. Have I not myself been imprisoned? Have I not myself been beaten?" It wasn't until later, when I was imprisoned again, that I understood the real meaning of torture, and how easy your humanity can be taken from you, for the time I was engaged in war, righteous, righteous war. Excuse me.

13:47

Sometimes I can stand before the world -- and when I say this, transformation is a difficult and slow process -- sometimes I can stand before the world and say, "My name is Chris Abani. I have been human six days, but only sometimes." But this is a good thing. It's never going to be easy. There are no answers. As I was telling Rachel from Google Earth, that I had challenged my students in America -- I said, "You don't know anything about Africa, you're all idiots." And so they said, "Tell me about Africa, Professor Abani." So I went to Google Earth and learned about Africa. And the truth be told, this is it, isn't it? There are no essential Africans, and most of us are as completely ignorant as everyone else about the continent we come from, and yet we want to make profound statements about it. And I think if we can just admit that we're all trying to approximate the truth of our own communities, it will make for a much more nuanced and a much more interesting conversation. I want to believe that we can be agnostic about this, that we can rise above all of this.

14:47

When I was 10, I read James Baldwin's "Another Country," and that book broke me. Not because I was encountering homosexual sex and love for the first time, but because the way James wrote about it made it impossible for me to attach otherness to it. "Here," Jimmy said. "Here is love, all of it." The fact that it happens in "Another Country" takes you quite by surprise. My friend Ronald Gottesman says there are three kinds of people in the world: those who can count, and those who can't. (Laughter) He also says that the cause of all our trouble is the belief in an essential, pure identity: religious, ethnic, historical, ideological.

15:31

I want to leave you with a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa that speaks to transformation. It's called "Ode to the Drum," and I'll try and read it the way Yusef would be proud to hear it read. "Gazelle, I killed you for your skin's exquisite touch, for how easy it is to be nailed to a board weathered raw as white butcher paper. Last night I heard my daughter praying for the meat here at my feet. You know it wasn't anger that made me stop my heart till the hammer fell. Weeks ago, you broke me as a woman once shattered me into a song beneath her weight, before you slouched into that grassy hush. And now I'm tightening lashes, shaped in hide as if around a ribcage, shaped like five bowstrings. Ghosts cannot slip back inside the body's drum. You've been seasoned by wind, dusk and sunlight. Pressure can make everything whole again. Brass nails tacked into the ebony wood, your face has been carved five times. I have to drive trouble in the hills. Trouble in the valley, and trouble by the river too. There is no palm wine, fish, salt, or calabash. Kadoom. Kadoom. Kadoom. Ka-doooom. Now I have beaten a song back into you. Rise and walk away like a panther." Thank you. (Applause)